

NH Diocese Violates Parishioners' Rights to Demolish Church

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Bp. Libasci won't talk to parishioners and is denying their right to appeal



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LACONIA, N.H. (ChurchMilitant.com) - Parishioners are being denied the right to appeal the closure of their historic church by a diocese that admits it plans on circumventing the canon law process.

Diocese of Manchester, New Hampshire, Bp. Peter Libasci would rather tear down St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Laconia, New Hampshire, than see it be used for something unbefitting a church.

On May 5, parishioners were told at a meeting a secret offer was accepted to buy the church. It would be closed down and demolished during the summer, and if they wanted to appeal, they should start the process. Later, they were told the process hadn't been started so there could be no appeal.

In a statement, Bp. Libasci said the demolition was necessary to prevent future owners of the church from using the church for "unacceptable purposes," adding, "While painful, is absolutely necessary."

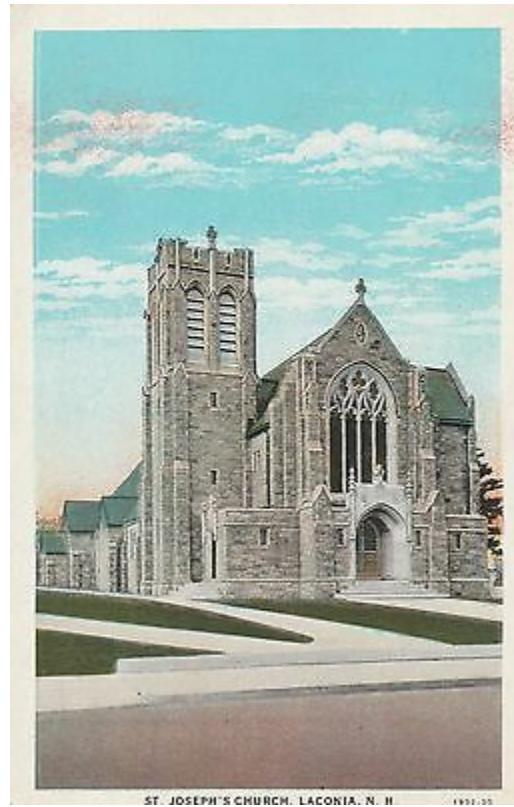
Church Militant spoke with Brody Hale, a lawyer and founder of Catholic Church Preservation Society, who is an expert on canon law with regards to church closures. Hale is also working with parishioners of St. Joseph Church in Mobile, Alabama, to appeal Abp. Thomas Rodi's sale of the church.

"It seems to be out of ignorance or downright treachery, the diocese is planning to tear it down before parishioners have a right to appeal," Hale said. "It is very disturbing the chief canon lawyer of a diocese does not grasp the basic process."

In 2013, the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy outlined very specific procedures for closing parishes and churches and sent them to every bishop in the United States.

The document, "Guidelines for the Modification of Parishes and the Closure, Relegation and Alienation of Churches," explicitly states that churches should remain as sacred spaces and continue to be used for worship as a chapel or by a religious order or lay apostolate.

Hale explained that churches are "sacred spaces set apart from the ordinary world" and they must be deconsecrated so as not to offend God. The guidelines explain that this is done by a "Decree of Relegation to Profane but not Sordid Use."



Holy card of St. Joseph's Catholic Church

This decree must be published in writing, and the faithful have 10 useful days to appeal the decree. Once that has been made, the appeals process begins and can take several years to complete.

During the parishioners' appeal process, the church cannot be sold or torn down.

Speaking to TheLaconia Daily Sun, Fr. Georges de Laire, the judicial vicar and the vicar for canonical affairs for the diocese of Manchester, criticized Hale's interpretation of canon law and claimed the decree can only be issued just before the church is torn down.

"Until it is known that the contract, the purchase and sale is going to be finalized, the church is not to be closed and relegated to profane but not sordid use," de Laire said.

"In this instance, should matters proceed as they are planned at this point, the relegation would take place soon before the contract with the demolition company takes effect," he added.

Hale explained this "short-circuited the process and is an attempt to cut off parishioners' rights to appeal the closure."

De Laire agreed with Hale that efforts should be made to keep churches as sacred spaces but said, "The parish has known for a couple of years that the church would be put for sale and should no one come forth to purchase, that the possibility of razing the church would be an element of consideration."

De Laire also confirmed that the diocese hasn't responded to Hale's communications.

In June, the diocese requested a permit for the demolition. The buyer has not stated what the plans are for the location that sits on a prominent city corner.

Canonical Incompetence

Saint Joseph's is not the first group to be targeted by de Laire and Bp. Libasci. The Slaves of the Immaculate Heart run the St. Benedict Center in Richmond, New Hampshire, and have been placed under sanctions for adhering to Catholic dogma. The misunderstanding stemmed from the community's motto, *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*, Latin for "outside the Church, there is no salvation."



Bp. Peter Libasci

After more than a decade of having daily Mass at their community and school, de Laire stripped the community of the privilege of having a diocesan priest.

De Laire accused them of violating canon 751 if the Code of Canon Law and accused them of being obstinate heretics.

In January, Church Militant learned that there have been at least three complaints against de Laire that allege corruption, abuse of office, grave violations of the law and incompetence as a canonist.

One of those complaints warned that under no circumstances should de Laire be named bishop.



Georges de Laire

Church Militant also learned that de Laire has been outsourcing his canon law work he was hired to do. Priests and laity working with him say he is manipulative and vindictive and is a careerist — hoping to be appointed to a Vatican post or named bishop.

What adds further insult to the razing of St. Joseph's Church is that de Laire owns an exclusive, 4,000-square-foot waterfront home worth over \$1.5 million. In May, a lien was placed on the property owing to de Laire's failure to pay the \$36,000 annual tax bill.

Community Reaction

Saint Joseph parishioner Linda Normandin told Church Militant they've received "total silence from the diocese." She and others have attempted to talk with the bishop and were prepared to take over the financial obligations of the church.

Saint Joseph's was home to generations of prominent Catholic families, and Normandin said they would have raised funds to purchase the church if they had to.

She said they haven't been treated very well from the diocese, and for some of the parishioners, "this is the last straw." She explained several families have stopped going to Mass at St. Joseph's and "a lot are considering giving up on the Catholic faith."

Even religious leaders from other faiths are outraged over Bp. Libasci's proposed demolition, and a Jewish leader attended the meetings.

"It's too much of a landmark," Normandin said. "They feel like there's going to be a gaping hole in the city if the church is torn down."

Saint Joseph's was started in 1845 as a mission and grew to a parish when Catholics settled in the area during the construction of the railroad from Concord, New Hampshire, to Montreal, Canada.

In a letter to The Laconia Daily Sun, Claire L. Hebert-Dow wrote, "I am major ticked off." Citing the response of Bp. Libasci to their dismay at the news their church was going to be razed, she said, "The last thing I wanted or expected, was a pat answer from our bishop of, 'Sorry, I understand your pain but too bad.'"

"Will our children and grandchildren know nothing different than in-fighting and lines in the sand gaining width and breadth?" she asked. "Why aren't we cherishing these?"



Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/P_eORGDc6vs

Speaking with Crux in 2018, Viktoria Somogyi, the producer of the documentary *Forclosing on Faith*, explained the bishops' official reasons to close churches — a shortage of priests, lack of parish life or the parish's debt — often don't apply to the ones being closed. Instead, the reason is financial.

Somogyi explained financial mismanagement at the diocesan level, financial difficulties and sex abuse settlements are the reasons for church closures in the United States.

I found that many of the faithful felt that the way the church closing process has been carried out was a grave spiritual abuse on the faithful and extremely destructive to the Catholic Church. Statistics prove that 40 percent of the faithful leave the Catholic Church after their church is closed because they are so scandalized by the process.

The bishops themselves admit "sale of church properties" are a major source of the funds used to pay for sex abuse settlements and legal fees.

Bishop Richard Malone of Buffalo, New York, said self-insurance, investment reserves and the sale of property will be used to pay for sex abuse settlements.

Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago sold the archdiocese's cathedral parking lot and Catholic cemeteries to pay for clerical sex abuse. In two weeks, the historic St. Adelbert is slated to close, six years after the decision was appealed.



St. Joseph's Church campus
Photo: Bill Hemmel, The Laconia Daily Sun

In 2003, Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley had to sell off 15 properties to settle an \$85 million award for 550 lawsuits by people who claimed to be abused by priests.

Like St. Joseph's, many of these churches have strong ties to American history and helped shaped the history of the local region.

Saint Joseph Church in Mobile, Alabama, had strong ties to the civil rights movement. The faith of Mobile's Catholic mayor, Joseph Langan, was credited for influencing his work with civil rights leader John LeFlore that kept a relative peace during the 1960s.

Archbishop Thomas Rodi acted in a similar manner to Bp. Libasci and refused to publish a decree that circumvented the Canonical process. The church was sold to a developer and gutted before the parishioners could appeal the closure.

Hale sees beautiful and historic churches as a tool of evangelization.

"They are a concrete representation of the devotion of His people and can bring people back to the Faith," he explained.

"We need donors motivated to preserve our sacred Catholic heritage," Hale said.

Funds are needed to both maintain these churches or buy them outright from the dioceses.

Hale explained that the financial arrangement can be structured in a way that bishops couldn't just close them down at a later time having the donations be in vain.

"There is so much more I could do if there were donors willing to step forward," Hale said.

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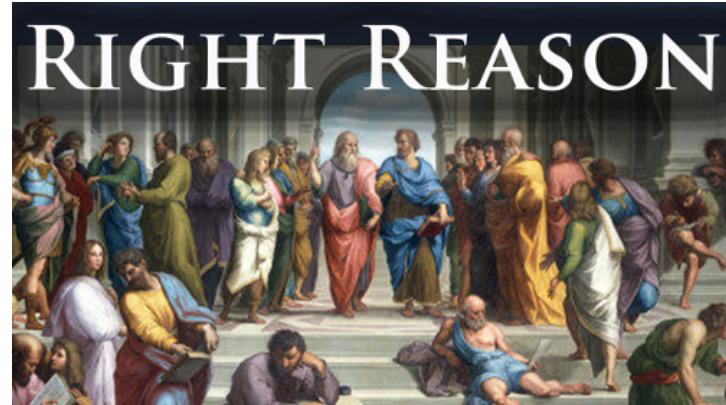
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